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C O N F I D E N T I A L ABUJA 001525

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL PBTS PINR CM NI

SUBJECT: INTERVENTION ON CAMEROON-NIGERIA MAY BE PREMATURE,
CAUSE MORE TROUBLE

REF: A. ABUJA 1472 AND PREVIOUS

1B. YAOUNDE 1301 AND PREVIOUS

1C. USUN 583

1D. PARIS 6316

Classified By: Ambassador John Campbell for Reasons 1.5 (B & D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: As per reftels from Abuja and Yaounde, Presidents Obasanjo and Biya have long been working together to implement the ICJ verdict on Nigeria's and Cameroon's border. President Obasanjo has told us (Ref A) August 23 that he and President Biya are "personally satisfied" with the status of the Bakassi handover, and that further movement by either side might wait until after Cameroon's presidential election in October. In the absence of President Biya saying his perception is different, i.e. that there is a problem between him and Obasanjo, the best way to make the system work is to show U.S. interest but not create extra problems. A tripartite demarche with the UK and France in New York to the Nigerian and Cameroonian permreps (together) would work. A demarche to the GON (especially lower than Obasanjo), however, could be premature if there is no problem between the presidents. It would be taken by Obasanjo as calling him a liar, and it would also create more diplomatic "white noise" that would have to be sorted out before the system could make progress -- even if that is after Cameroon's election. End Summary.

12. (C) Obasanjo has repeatedly told us, most recently telling Senator Hagel in Ref A, that he was handling the Bakassi issue personally with Biya, and that Biya and he were content with the system and its outcomes. Cameroonian officials have long been expressing concern about the Mixed Commission meetings, and sought to enlist the USG, UK and France to pressure Nigeria. Evidence from both sides suggests that details of the Nigerian withdrawal from Bakassi (if at all) and of the settlement of the maritime boundary, are closely held by the two presidents, and that both presidents have been extremely careful not to let the settlement play into their respective 2003 and 2004 presidential elections. All agree that the two presidents have met often, and spoken by phone as well, in recent months.

13. (C) At the moment, it seems very difficult to tell if what Obasanjo told Senator Hagel is accurate, or if there really is a problem between the two presidents that puts the system implementing the ICJ decision at risk. It might be worthwhile to learn Biya's views firsthand. If there is no problem, a USG demarche to the GON could easily create one by giving the impression that it was a pressure tactic from the Cameroonians -- and perhaps not even from the top there. It will also create more "white noise" of distracting diplomatic activity at lower levels that would have to be sorted out by Obasanjo and Biya before they get down to finishing the Bakassi and maritime boundary arrangements.

14. (C) If Biya says he is having a problem with Obasanjo, a USG demarche would still add to the diplomatic "white noise" and still could be a bargaining tactic by Biya, but at least we could say Biya said there is a problem. We would not be the problem. The British High Commission says they are not aware of any demarche being worked up in London to the GON, and they have the same perspective as we that the Biya-Obasanjo dynamic is key and a demarche now to the GON would be counterproductive to that dynamic.

15. (C) In the meantime, it could be useful to show our collective interest in the outcome via a tripartite demarche with the British and French in New York to the assembled Nigerian and Cameroonian permreps. Given Obasanjo's stated views, it would be counterproductive to bring up the September 15 date in that session, and the focus should be on our interest in the process reaching a successful (ICJ implementation) conclusion. It might also be worthwhile, in a nuanced way, to note the frequent interaction between the two presidents and urge discipline on lower officials on both sides to avoid raising issues different from their principals.

CAMPBELL